Assessing the Threat of Antisemitic Harassment and Attack in France—Paris in Focus

Gunther Jikeli

Abstract

Reports of antisemitic harassment and attacks against Jews in France have become frequent in the French and international media. However, such reports are mostly anecdotal and provide only limited information on how widespread these attacks are or if they are increasing over time. Has antisemitism become a frequent experience for French Jews? Are certain community members especially targeted? How likely is it that a Jewish visitor to France is attacked? How threatened do Jews feel and what is the impact of the perceived threat?

This paper reviews official statistics on antisemitic incidents (1), attitude surveys of the general population in France (2), and surveys among Jews (3). All three indicators have their weaknesses but taken together they can help to assess the threat that Jews in France face today of becoming victim of antisemitic harassment or attacks.

Keywords  France, antisemitism, physical attacks, Orthodox Jews, Paris

ANTISEMITIC INCIDENTS

Jews can become victimized in multiple ways. Antisemitism often takes the form of derogatory remarks, outright insults, discrimination, aggressive behaviors, and physical violence against Jews because they are Jews, as well as damage to property owned by Jewish individuals or organizations, often including hateful graffiti messages. Additionally, antisemitism that does not necessarily directly target Jews appears in propaganda, conspiracy theories, and on social media. Only a fraction of these incidents are registered. However, the absolute numbers of hate crimes and incidents are often less important for an evaluation of their impact than their character, such as violence and brutality. Hate crimes, especially violent and highly mediated hate crimes, send a threatening message to an entire community that they also might become a victim of such crimes.

French authorities have registered antisemitic incidents since 1979. The National Consultative Commission on Human Rights (CNCDH), a government agency, publishes annual reports on antisemitism, racism and xenophobia, including statistics and analyses of racist, xenophobic, and anti-Muslim incidents. The statistics list violent acts against people or their property that are serious or leave irreparable damage, as well as threats. Threats are all other registered antisemitic acts, such as threatening verbal assaults or gestures, graffiti, antisemitic pamphlets, insults, light assaults, and other acts of intimidation. However, the majority of antisemitic incidents go unreported. Only 23% of the French participants in a 2012 survey who have become victims of antisemitic incidents said that they reported it to police or to another organization. The number was even lower, 18%, in a follow-up survey in 2018. The graph below shows the annual figures of registered incidents from 1994 to 2018.
The number of antisemitic incidents per year has risen significantly in France in the early 2000s and has remained high ever since. Although Jews make up only a small minority in France (less than 1% of the total population), they have been the target of about a third or more of all registered racist and religious-hate incidents, including hate incidents against Blacks, Arabs, Roma and Muslims. In 2014, the majority of such hate incidents targeted Jews. The latest available figures are for 2019. In that year, French authorities registered 687 antisemitic acts, including 151 cases of damage to property or physical assaults against individuals.

The sharp rise of antisemitic incidents in the year 2000 is striking. The average number of (registered) antisemitic acts per year in the 1990s was 110, whereas it was almost 600 per year on average between 2000 and 2018. We can observe some peaks in years of heightened tensions and violence in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, but in all years the level of antisemitic acts has remained much higher than in the 1990s. It seems that heightened tensions and violence in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict trigger some antisemitic acts in addition to an already high level of antisemitic incidents. I have shown elsewhere that images and reports about this conflict can have an emotionalizing and radicalizing effect on those who have an antisemitic perception of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Antisemites often do not distinguish between the Israeli government, Israelis and “the Jews.” If Israel is demonized and Jews and Israelis are conflated, then this results in demonization and suspicion of all Jews and lowers the threshold to act upon negative attitudes toward Jews.

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict thus has a mobilizing effect for some antisemites, which can explain some of the peaks. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict, however, is not the only external conflict that has triggered antisemitic acts. A month-to-month analysis shows peaks during the 1991 Iraq war, after the terror attacks of 9/11, and the 2003 Iraq war. It also shows that severe antisemitic violence, such as the murder of three young children and a teacher in a Jewish school in Toulouse in March 2012, are followed by higher levels of antisemitic incidents. Antisemitic violence seems to have a mobilizing effect, spurring antisemitic sentiments into further antisemitic actions.

The statistics not only reveal a significant rise in antisemitic acts since 2000. They also
show a rise in the proportion of violent acts to non-violent acts. Antisemitic acts have become more violent in the last two decades. Whereas the share of violent acts in the 1990s was only once above 10% (in 1999) and violent acts were generally an exception, numbering between one and twelve violent acts per year, the share of violent acts has risen to almost 30% in recent years.

Antisemitic Incidents Mostly in Metropolitan Paris

The large majority of antisemitic incidents in France have been registered in Paris (department 75) and the surrounding suburbs (departments 92, 93, 94, and 95), see graph below. One of the reasons of course is that about half of the Jews in France live in or around Paris.\textsuperscript{10} However, antisemitic incidents in Paris are concentrated in certain districts, especially on the east side. Therefore, many Jews move from the east side of Paris and from Parisian suburbs to upper-class neighborhoods on the west side, if they can afford it. Others have moved to other cities in France, such as Strasbourg, or have left the country altogether.\textsuperscript{11} A popular Parisian area for Jews is now the 17th district in the east of Paris. “The 17th arrondissement of Paris has welcomed many Jewish families wishing to live their faith fully with the feeling of being protected and safe from antisemitic threats,” as Vincent Mongaillard put it in \textit{Le Parisien}.\textsuperscript{12} The Marais is a similarly upper-class neighborhood but more known for its tourist attractions and its fashionable boutiques, galleries, and bars catering to members of the LGBTQ community. Marc Knobel, chief researcher of CRIF (Representative Council of French Jewry), notes, “For the Marais, the neighborhood has been very much gentrified. It is no longer such an attractive center for Parisian Jews, who prefer now to live in the 17th arrondissement. Moreover, the appearance of the Marais changes. In this neighborhood, it should be noted that attacks are aimed primarily at members of the LGBTQ community.”\textsuperscript{13}

Orthodox Jews are particularly concerned about antisemitism in certain neighborhoods because they are easily recognized as Jews and therefore more frequently targeted, as I will discuss further below. However, the two illustrations below show a map of Paris with the number of antisemitic incidents that led to filing a complaint in 2016 and 2017 by district.

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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{breakdown_by_department.png}
\caption{Graph 2. Source: SPCJ}
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Gunther Jikeli

The graph below shows the number of antisemitic incidents in Paris that led to filing a complaint between 2012 and 2018 by district.

The illustrations and, more clearly, graph 3 with data from 2012–2018, show a concentration of antisemitic incidents in districts 19 and 20. But incidents have been reported in other areas, too, including the 17th district and the 3rd and 4th districts, where the Marais neighborhood is located. A wave of antisemitic graffiti was reported across inner city areas in February 2019.

Compared to some other neighborhoods, antisemitic incidents are less frequent in the 17th district and the Marais, but they are not absent. Additionally, inner city neighborhoods with multiple tourist attractions, such as the Marais neighborhood, are a preferred target for terrorists (who often share antisemitic ideologies and have a preference for Jewish targets). Some of the terrorist attacks on November 13, 2015, which killed 130 people in Paris, were in close proximity to the Marais neighborhood. The US Department of State has put France on level two out of four of travel warnings and advises increased caution due to terrorism and civil unrest, as of April 1, 2019.

Antisemitic Attitudes in France

While there is clear evidence of the rise of antisemitic violence and a rise of the number of antisemitic acts since 2000, the picture is less clear for antisemitic attitudes. Survey data that allow for comparison of antisemitic attitudes before and after the turn of the 21st century is limited, and only a handful of beliefs surveyed both before and after 2000, such as the item “The Jews have too much power in France.” No clear trend can be identified comparing figures since 1988. Between 16 and 37% of the French population, depending on the year of the poll, believe that the Jews have too much power in France, with one peak from 1999 to 2002 and another one in 2013 (33%) and 2014 (37%). However, in 2018, “only” 17% agreed that “Jewish people have too much influence in political affairs in France.”

Nevertheless, despite a recent drop in antisemitic attitudes in some surveys, the most recent results from September 2018 are not encouraging in absolute terms: 24% think that Jews have too much influence in finance and business across the world; 20% believe that Jews have too much influence in French media; and 25% think that Jews have too much influence in conflicts and wars involving France.

A Pew survey conducted in summer 2017 found that 19% in France agreed that “Jews always pursue their own interests and not the interest of the country they live in”; and 17% percent agreed that “Jews always overstate how much they have suffered.” Socially, however, Jews seems to be more accepted than other...
minorities. Only 7% percent would not be willing to accept Jews as neighbors and 11% percent would not be willing to accept Muslims as neighbors.20

Thus, large parts of the French population have subscribed to stereotypes about Jewish power and influence. However, the majority of the French population also has positive views about Jews. 90% believe that Jews are well integrated, 71% think that Jews have contributed considerably to French art and literature, and 60% feel that Judaism is part of French culture today.21

Jews are often accused of double allegiance and communautarisme. In 1995 only 26% thought that a Frenchman of Jewish origin feels to be closer to another Frenchman regardless his religion, opposed to 58% who thought that a Frenchman of Jewish origin feels rather closer to another Jew regardless his nationality.22 The ADL surveys from 2002 to 2017 show that between 28% (2004) and 45% (2012) of the general population believed that “Jews are more loyal to Israel than to France.”

Surveys of sympathy/antipathy toward Jews show that the overwhelming majority today feels neither sympathy nor antipathy if they learn that somebody in their entourage is Jewish. Available survey data of the general population does not provide any evidence that antisemitic attitudes have soared in tandem with antisemitic incidents.

A Shift of Antisemitic Tropes?

Antisemitic stereotypes might have been shifted from classic antisemitic stereotypes (which are captured in polls) to newer forms. Scholars have discussed the emergence of a “new antisemitism,” particularly in the form of antizionism.23 Some surveys seem to support this thesis. In 2014, 39% had a negative opinion of Israel (40% in 2013). The ADL surveys between 2002 and 2017 have shown that about a third of the population believes that “Jews are more loyal to Israeli than to France.” This refers not only to the old anti-Jewish stereotype of national disloyalty but it might also be an indication that many conflate Jews and Israelis. If Jews and Israelis are conflated and if Israel or Zionism is demonized, then French Jews are demonized by proxy. And even if Jews and Israelis are not conflated, demonization of Israel or Zionism leads to a general suspicion that French Jews are supportive of an evil country or ideology. Taguieff and others have highlighted many examples of both a demonization of Israel and a conflation of Jews and Israelis by French journalists, scholars, activists, and politicians.24

A survey from 2014 found that 37% agreed with the statement “Zionism is an ideology that serves Israel to justify its policy of occupation and colonization of the Palestinian territories.” Only 19% disagreed. 23% saw Zionism as a racist ideology, and 25% agreed that “Zionism is an international organization that tries to influence the world and the [French] society in support of Jews.”25 Thus, a quarter of the French population believed in an antizionist and antisemitic conspiracy theory. The figure was even higher among those who declared themselves to be supporters of the extreme right party Front National (32%), the Green party (31%), the radical left party Front de Gauche (28%). In a separate sample of Muslim participants, the majority (57%) agreed that “Zionism is an international organization that tries to influence the world and the [French] society in support of Jews.” Four years later, another poll found approval rates of 53% to this statement, resembling ideas from the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.26

To conclude, the level of antisemitic attitudes does not seem to have risen significantly on average, but some factions of French society, namely large parts of supporters of the extreme right, large parts of the Muslim population, and some parts of the extreme left, harbor strong antisemitic attitudes and express them perhaps more openly in newer stereotypes, that is, in anti-Zionist forms.
How do French Jews Perceive Antisemitism?

Four recent surveys show that the majority of French Jews are worried about the rise of antisemitism. A survey conducted in 2012 for the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) showed that 52% of the 1,192 Jews surveyed in France considered antisemitism to be a “very big problem,” and an additional 33% thought that it is a “fairly big problem.”

This major concern about antisemitism was confirmed in a poll conducted by Ipsos during the months following the January 2015 Jihadist attack on the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo and the kosher grocery Hypercasher. Participants were asked to choose four issues that they were most worried about out of a long list of topics, including unemployment, taxes, and purchasing power—issues that were on top of the list of worries in overall French society in 2014 (which may have changed after the terror attacks in 2015 and 2016). Jewish participants, however, were most worried about antisemitism (67%), terrorism (50%), and religious fundamentalism (48%). 92% said that the level of antisemitism had risen in the last five years.

Such worries seem to be based at least in part on direct experiences of antisemitism. Forty-five percent declared that they had been personally subjected to antisemitic remarks or insults during the last year, and 11% reported they had been physically attacked. The authors of the study observed a widespread and increasing feeling among Jews that they were no longer safe in France. 81% declared that “today, if you are Jewish, there are good reasons to be afraid of living in France,” and 76% said that “it is difficult to be Jewish in France today.”

A third study, conducted in summer 2015 by Ifop for the Fondation Jean-Jaurès, draws on an impressive and very sound representative survey of the French adult population of 45,250 participants, among them 724 individuals who declared themselves to be Jewish in a religious sense (“faith”) or to have at least one Jewish parent. Sixty-three percent among them believed that “racism against Jews” is very present in French society today. 63% reported to have personally experienced antisemitic insults at least once, 51% reported experiencing threats, and 43% experienced attacks against themselves. 47% reported to have personally experienced antisemitic insults on multiple occasions, 39% experienced threats, and 32% experienced attacks. In the space of a few years, antisemitism has become a frequent occurrence for many French Jews.

Interestingly, the survey shows significant differences according to the level of religious practice. Practicing Jews are much more likely to be subjected to antisemitic attacks than non-practicing Jews. These findings have also been confirmed in a study on EU countries, including France. You are more likely to become the target of antisemitic insults and violent attacks if you are visibly Jewish, male, and young.

85% of very observant Jews said that they have been insulted for being Jewish at least once. 51% of very practicing Jews, 37% of somewhat practicing Jews, 22% of those who practice little, and “only” 10% of Jews who do not practice at
all said that they had been insulted multiple times because of their Jewish identity. 56% of very practicing Jews, 27% of somewhat practicing Jews, 22% of those who practice little, and 7% of Jews who do not practice at all said that they had been threatened multiple times because of their Jewish identity. Violence was also a common experience for many practicing Jews. 41% of very practicing Jews, 25% of somewhat practicing Jews, 25% of those who practice little, and 6% of Jews who do not practice at all said that they had been attacked multiple times because of their Jewish identity.

These differences can be explained by the higher visibility of practising Jews. A large number of antisemitic verbal and physical attacks come from strangers who identify Jews and Jewish institutions by physical markers, most prominently, religious symbols. Thus, it comes as no surprise that practicing Jews are more often attacked than non-practicing Jews.

Parents who have children, including children who attend Jewish schools, are likely to have experienced antisemitic insults (82% if children attend a Jewish school, but the experience can predate attendance of that school). Between 84% and 90% of men who wear a kippah sometimes or regularly have been insulted for being Jewish. The survey did not include children under eighteen years old, but the younger the respondents were the more often they had been subjected to antisemitic insults. It can thus be assumed that Orthodox boys in France (who wear a kippah) are likely to experience some antisemitic insults.

This is also true for antisemitic threats and aggressions. 77% of parents of at least one child who attends a Jewish school have experienced antisemitic threats. Between 81% and 84% of men who wear a kippah sometimes or regularly have been threatened for being Jewish. Seventy percent of parents of at least one child who attends a Jewish school have experienced antisemitic aggression. Between 70% and 77% of men who wear a kippah sometimes or regularly have reported antisemitic attacks. However, as noted earlier, antisemitic incidents are more frequent in some neighborhoods than in others.33

Unsurprisingly, 76% of Jews surveyed in the aforementioned survey conducted by Ipsos in 2015 thought that it is difficult to be Jewish in France today, and only 2% thought that antisemitism had diminished in the last five years. 67% think that it has risen a lot. Antisemitism has led Jews to change their behavior, including religious practice.

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45% of participants in the Ipsos survey chose “I have the tendency to pay attention not to show that I am Jewish” over “I haven’t really changed my behavior in this respect.” 42% tended to advise their children not to show their Jewish identity. 34

51% of the French-Jewish respondents to the FRA study conducted in 2012 declared that they avoid wearing, carrying, or displaying things that might help people identify them as Jews in public. 35

26% of the 2015 Ipsos survey respondents declared that they are looking seriously into the option of leaving France for Israel or another country. Among those who do not wish to emigrate, the most frequent reason for this was that they are French and that their life is in France. A further rise of terrorism and radical Islamism, on the other hand, would seem to be the most significant factors that could lead to more emigration. 36

The figures of French Jews migrating to Israel in 2015 were the highest on record, with 7,469 according to the Israeli Ministry of Aliyah and Immigration Absorption. Since 2013, more Jews migrate from France to Israel than from the United States to Israel (where the Jewish population is more than 10 times larger than in France). In 2014, 6,658 French Jews, about half of them from Paris, made Aliyah. This was a sharp rise from 2013 (3,263) and 2012 (1,923). 37 However, since 2016 the numbers have gone down.

Those who have personally experienced antisemitism are much more likely to leave France than those who have not. 78% of those who never thought about Aliyah have never experienced antisemitism, but 70% of those who are seriously thinking about emigrating to Israel have experienced antisemitism at least once. 38

The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights commissioned another study in which European Jews were asked in 2018 about their views and experiences. 3,869 Jews from France participated in the survey. 20% said family members had been victims of verbal insults or harassment and/or physically attacked because of being Jewish in the past year. 60% of the French participants reported being afraid of becoming a victim of verbal insults or harassment and/or physically attacked because of being Jewish. Worries about family members becoming victimized are even higher. 27% had personally experienced antisemitic harassment (including harassment on social

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media) in the past twelve months, and 37% in the past five years. Twenty percent of respondents in France say they have felt discriminated against in employment (at work or when looking for work), education, health, or housing, based on their religion or beliefs.39 Across participants from twelve countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom), worries about an antisemitic physical attack or verbal harassment correlated with observing Jewish practices, as well as with the strength of respondents’ religiosity and their age. Younger respondents expressed concern about antisemitic victimisation at higher levels than older people.40 These worries and personal experiences of antisemitism have direct consequences on Jewish life. 36% of French respondents avoid frequently or always wearing, carrying, or displaying in public items that could identify them as Jewish, and 46% occasionally avoid this (graph 5). 44% have considered emigrating.41

Future developments seem uncertain. 67% think that the French government does not combat antisemitism effectively.42

CONCLUSIONS

Antisemitism has been on the rise in France since the turn of the twenty-first century and antisemitic incidents have become more violent. Heightened tensions and violence in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as well as other external conflicts, such as the Iraq war, have triggered some antisemitic acts in addition to an already high level of antisemitic incidents.

Orthodox men who visibly wear a kippah and younger people are especially at risk. Orthodox Jews are likely to face antisemitic harassments, threats, and aggressions at least once in their lives. The threat of antisemitism also depends on the neighborhood. In Paris, inner-city, upper-class neighborhoods are safer than some other neighborhoods for Jews. However, inner city neighborhoods with multiple tourist attractions are a preferred target for terrorists who often share antisemitic ideologies and have a preference for Jewish targets.

The level of antisemitic attitudes does not seem to have risen significantly on average, but some factions of French society, namely, large parts of supporters of the extreme right, large parts of the Muslim population, and some parts of the extreme left, harbor strong antisemitic attitudes and express them perhaps more openly in newer stereotypes, that is, in anti-Zionist forms. These forms were not captured in older surveys. However, the percentage of the population who believed in some kind of anti-Zionist conspiracy theories has risen from 25% in 2014 to 53% in 2018.

It is thus not surprising that four recent surveys among Jews all point in the same direction. The majority of Jews are worried about the rise of antisemitism which has affected many of them personally. Depending on the survey (question), between 37% and 63% of French Jews have personally experienced antisemitic harassment or attacks. This number rises to up to a staggering 85% for Jews who declare to be very observant. These
differences can be explained by the higher visibility of practicing Jews. A large number of antisemitic verbal and physical attacks come from strangers who identify Jews and Jewish institutions by physical markers, most prominently religious symbols.

REFERENCES

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5. La lutte contre le racisme, antisémitisme et la xénophobie. Année 2014.
6. This does not include the unusual high number of 392 antisemitic incidents in 1990, largely due to the defamation of the Jewish cemetery in Carpentas by neo-Nazis. La lutte contre le racisme et la xénophobie, Année 1991, Commission nationale consultative des droits de l’homme (CNCDH), 1992, 24.
13. Marc Knobel, chief researcher of CRIF (Representative Council of French Jewry), in an email to the author, May 27, 2019, translated from French by the author. Asked about the situation now in the Marais, Jean-Yves Camus, a French scholar on antisemitism and the extreme right, writes: “I work in the Marais [and I] do some of my kosher shopping there. On weekdays I pray at the Pavée Street with the Charedim [community]. Everything is calm. The Pavée Street synagogue does not have any particular police presence. The locals are used to Orthodox Jews and it’s a very bourgeois neighborhood now. No recent antisemitic acts.” Jean-Yves Camus in an email to the author, May 27, 2019, translated from French by the author. Michaël Ghnassia, a French attorney who has his office in the Marais and who is familiar with antisemitic criminal cases in Paris, also said that the Marais is a safe area for Jews, whereas he would not necessarily recommend Orthodox Jewish families move to some Parisian suburbs where more antisemitic incidents have been recorded. Michaël Ghnassia in a phone conversation with the author, May 28, 2019.
16. The surveys featured different questions, but the differences regarding the item “The Jews have too much power in France” were minimal. I used the survey results presented by Mayer et al. and added the results of the 1990 Ipsos survey. Nonna Mayer, Guy Michelat, Vincent Tiberj, and Tommaso Vitale, “La stabilisation de l’indice de tolérance”


19 Ibid.


21 Mayer et al., “La stabilisation de l’indice de tolérance” and “La revitalisation des vieux clichés antisémites.”

22 Ipsos representative survey with 1000 participants (fifteen years and above), surveyed January 6–9, 1995.

23 Pierre-André Taguieff is the most prominent and most prolific scholar in France who argues that hatred against Jews has changed profoundly and prefers the term “judeophobia” to “antisemitism.” See his *Une France antijuive?: La Judéophobie des Modernes*; and *Rising from the Muck: The New Anti-Semitism in Europe* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2004).


26 *Les Français et les 70 ans d’Israël*, Ifop representative survey with 1007 participants (eighteen years and above), surveyed online, May 2–3, 2018, 15.

27 Worries were also high in other countries. On average, 66% of surveyed Jews in eight European countries, Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, considered antisemitism to be a “very big or fairly big problem.” *Discrimination and Hate Crime against Jews in EU Member States*, 15.


30 Fourquet and Manternach, *L’an prochain à Jérusalem?*

31 Ibid., 69–70.


33 *Enquête auprès des juifs de France* [Annex questionnaire with responses of the study led by Jérôme Fourquet and Sylvain Manternach], IFOP for the Fondation Jean-Jaurès, 2015, 53–59.


37 Updated numbers can be found at http://www.moia.gov.il/Hebrew/InformationAndAdvertising/Statistics/Pages/ImmigrationToIsraelCurrentYear.aspx.

38 Fourquet and Manternach, *L’an prochain à Jérusalem?*, 205.

39 *Experiences and Perceptions of Antisemitism. Second Survey on Discrimination and Hate Crime against Jews in the EU*, 33, 34, 57, and 60.

40 Ibid., 35.

41 Ibid., 37–39.

42 Ibid., 41.